

## Chapter 11

### Class in Action

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Trying to use the concept of class in contemporary cultural analysis presents several problems. Examining these problems clarifies why thinking about gender and race/ethnicity has progressed in recent years while class analysis has stalled. Most analysts start considering class from a Marxist framework, but that tradition does not provide simple answers except to the simplistic.<sup>1</sup> A full elaboration of the concept of class for cultural analysis calls for a reconsideration of class within Marxism and sociology. It would have to include an explanation of production and diffusion as well as texts themselves. It would have to account for class differences in audience reception. It would have to develop across, between, and within diverse media. And it would have to consider the interrelation of class with gender, race, ethnicity, age/generation, region, and so on.

As a starting point, I examine below the representation of class in a currently popular Hollywood genre, the action hero film. Rather than presenting a comprehensive analysis or a definitive model based on one example, I discuss the problems involved in the enterprise. Unpacking the issues seems more productive now than tying up the loose ends. This essay proceeds according to a roughly historical organization. First I explain my immediate interests; I then discuss some work in film studies that is foundational to my concerns with the representation of class. Next, I

elaborate my current thinking about issues of class in mainstream film with a discussion of a Steven Seagal film, *Above the Law*. Finally, I address issues that remain for theory and criticism in dealing with class, recognizing that historical developments move faster than the critical apparatus that tries to understand them.

#### Star in Motion

A newly emerged action hero auteur, Steven Seagal, as actor, writer, director, and producer, has produced six distinctive action films. In his debut, *Above the Law* (1988), he plays a Chicago cop who battles Central American drug pushers protected by the CIA because they help channel money to the Nicaraguan Contras and El Salvador's repressive government. In *Hard to Kill* (1990) he is a cop who, from his deathbed, fights back to health and revenge upon the corrupt cops who, in league with an evil politician, have murdered his wife and tried to kill him. In *Marked for Death* (1990) he is a former Drug Enforcement Administration agent who burns out in Mexico but who then reenlists in the fight when Jamaican drug gangs threaten his Chicago suburban sister and niece. In *Out for Justice* (1991) he is a Brooklyn cop hunting down a drug-crazed killer he has known since boyhood in their Italian neighborhood. In *Under Siege* (1992) he appears as a former Navy Seal, now serving out his time as a cook, who saves the battleship *Missouri* when a former CIA operative's gang tries to steal its nuclear missiles. And in *On Deadly Ground* (1994) he is again a former special forces operative, now an oil rigger who discovers oil corporate greed is threatening the Alaskan wilderness and who, after encountering a murderous trap set up by the oil company, is saved from death by native people and transformed into an avenger who destroys the environmentally threatening refinery. Throughout this corpus, Seagal distinguishes himself through his highly developed martial arts skill. The actor studied aikido and other martial arts in Japan for fifteen years before moving to Los Angeles as a master teacher and becoming involved in choreographing film fights. Such sequences are obligatory in his films, occur with predictable regularity (if he enters a bar, we know there will be a fight), and reflect his talent for action spectacle. He is not adept at character dialogue except in confrontations preced-



ing a fight, and his films avoid romantic or love interests (unlike Bruce Willis in the *Die Hard* series) and buddy-partner interaction (unlike Mel Gibson with Danny Glover in the *Lethal Weapon* series).<sup>2</sup>

I first encountered Steven Seagal's image in 1988 in neighborhood video stores. Although I was vaguely aware of his theatrical film debut in *Above the Law*, the ads and reviews for that film led me to expect just another Sylvester Stallone clone enhanced with the martial arts skill of Chuck Norris: perhaps a recycled Billy Jack. But when the video appeared in the mom-and-pop rental stores of my Chicago Latino-Polish predominantly working-class neighborhood, suddenly I found the film's poster prominently displayed, multiple boxes of the tape placed for rental, and a continuous pestering of the store operators by people who wanted to rent the film but found all copies rented out. This continued for months. That demand sparked my interest. Why should this film, above so many others, have such a following in my neighborhood? I decided to rent it, but I had to wait along with everyone else.

Eventually I saw the film and discovered one reason for the draw. It had been shot in my part of Chicago, offering a great pleasure of recognition. But clearly the enthusiasm of the renters—who were often but by no means exclusively adolescent and young men—went beyond familiar pleasure. At the same time, although Seagal was so well known and enthusiastically greeted as each subsequent film arrived in the neighborhood (where one video store sign seemed to say it all generically: "Action, Horror, Comedy, Adult"), I knew few would know his films at my workplace. At Northwestern University, a private elite school in professional-managerial class Evanston, Illinois, when I mentioned my interest in his films to fellow teachers and students, the only substantial comment I heard was from one M.F.A. student in the Radio/Television/Film Department, who dismissively said that Seagal's sound tracks always heighten physical combat scenes with the loud crack of breaking bones.<sup>3</sup> It's true—this stylistic trait may derive from cinematic kung fu traditions.

In some video stores Seagal films appear in the martial arts section; in others, they are in the action section. This underlines the generic nature of his corpus. Probably the easiest way to identify the action genre is through the marketing device of video boxes.

Almost invariably an action video cover shows a person with a determined face looking straight out while prominently holding a gun (or other weapon, such as a knife), or a figure in a martial arts pose. This iconography shades off in one direction to the action adventure (e.g., the Indiana Jones series), science fiction, or war film in the direction of spectacle, and in the other in the private eye, cop, gangster, or western genre. The promise is clearly a shoot-'em-up that stresses action over dialogue, spectacle over character drama, and violence as a means of resolving problems. Critical discussion of these issues sometimes involves unreflective endorsement, as in an older model of popular culture studies. At times, recognition of a comic and/or ironic strain in the action film, as in some of Clint Eastwood's roles after the mid-1970s, moderates the analysis. But more often we find a directly negative view of the often obvious masculinist, racial, and political bias of the genre.

Commonplace thinking about the genre posits a primary audience of boys and young men, irrespective of class. In addition, it is common wisdom that the genre appeals more to the working class and the poor than to the educated middle class. Much of the current public discussion of excessive violence in films, television, rap music, and video games contains this unexamined assumption, and arguments for regulation and censorship of violent representations usually assume that such regulation is necessary because working-class and poor boys and young men especially need to be socially controlled. That this attitude interweaves class and race prejudice, especially when the euphemism "urban underclass" is evoked, goes without saying. And obviously the issue replays the construction of "juvenile delinquency" as a social problem and comic books as mental corruption in the 1950s.

In the Reagan era, many critics identified the action genre as especially ideologically reactionary when militant presidential posturing was associated with the filmic heroism of Rambo.<sup>4</sup> But this criticism was often so sweeping that it ignored considerable variation and complexity in the genre. It also attributed a vast sexism, racism, and political reactionism (which was true of some of the films) to all of them. To top it off, the films were often claimed to be aesthetically deformed by spectacle, violence, and postmodern pastiche. In her recent reconsideration, *Spectacular Bodies: Gen-*



der, *Genre and the Action Cinema* (1993), Yvonne Tasker argues that the genre is not so simple and obvious. Through an examination of gender, race, sexuality, and nationhood, she finds the action films much more ambivalent than critics have allowed; she asserts that they open multiple spectator pleasures.

Those who dismiss action cinema do not recognize how well it produces some of the key pleasures of Hollywood cinema. First, it is based in the presentation of action. It uses movement—of actors, of vehicles, of objects—which, combined with the editing technique of cutting on action, produces a strong kinesthetic pleasure in the audience. Action narratives exploit techniques of cross-cutting to build the suspense of search sequences and to escalate the kinetic pace of chase sequences. They have the capacity to provide exotic locales, impressive landscapes, cityscapes, or vast, complex interiors. Further, action is embodied in the physical presence of the actors, who have highly expressive physiques and martial skills. Action also produces (especially in the theatrical viewing setting) the shared group pleasure of anticipation and resolution, both on the large scale of broad narrative development and on the micro level of defeating an opponent by breaking an arm (with a loud sound-track crack).

Because of their kinetic, corporeal, and spectacular foundations, action films, along with other “physical” genres (horror, melodrama, farce, pornography), often receive dismissive consideration from critics and theorists who look down on them from a position of class prejudice. The concept of class remains unaddressed by most film theorists, although some authors have helped to clarify the basic issues. For example, in his pioneering 1974 article, “The Anatomy of a Proletarian Film: Warner’s *Marked Woman*,” Charles Eckert recognizes the class nature of commercial entertainment cinema:

My major contention is that the ultimate sources of *Marked Woman* [1937] and its tradition are in class conflict; but the level at which the film-makers perceive this conflict, and the level at which it is lived by the fictional characters and perceived by the audience, is existential rather than political or economic. . . . The expression of the conflict in the films, however, is almost never overt. It is instead converted into conflicts of a

surrogate nature—some ethical, some regional, some concerned with life-style, some symbolized by tonal or aesthetic overlays. (Eckert, [1974] 1985, 409)

Through textual processes of condensation and displacement, the deep structure of class conflict is converted into manifest content, but the effect is “to attenuate conflicts at the level of real conditions and to amplify and resolve them at the surrogate levels of the melodrama” (409). The papering over of contradictions is not perfect. The resulting work makes a “disjuncture between the melodramatic and the strongly affective scenes apparent” (409), which provides an entry for further analysis.

Eckert alerts us to the need to understand displacement in popular narrative. Employing the term *melodrama* in its common use in 1930s film criticism to refer to sensational action sequences, he also emphasizes how spectacle can shape narrative, and how it contrasts with domestic, personal scenes. Eckert’s work develops understanding of the domestic melodrama and reminds us that the action formula often uses public space as a site for masculine adventure, but it is always crucially paired with domestic space. Often at significant moments the two worlds intersect, as when the villain enters familial space or personal matters are enacted in public places.<sup>5</sup>

Following Eckert, in an earlier essay I discuss two bio films on daredevil Evel Knievel and race-car driver Junior Johnson in terms of the characters as working-class heroes: men who clearly came out of the working class and who are heroes to the working class (Kleinhans [1974] 1985). The characters embody a fairly straightforward version of the U.S. success myth in which adherence to code values and virtues lead to triumph in sport entertainment. I discuss the films in terms of their appeal to working-class audiences, drawing on sociological analyses of blue-collar workers and comparing those with similar figurations in the narrative. Rather than seeing displacement as a central strategy, by dealing with two films that achieved their initial popularity with working-class audiences, I examined how these films portray the U.S. success myth in ways that match the complications of working-class audience expectations and fantasies. My understanding of the films assumes that the representation and narration in the aesthetic object



can be fully understood only through a comparison in terms of the sociology of the working class. Audience understanding, then, mediates between the experienced realities of working-class life and the aesthetic representation of the class on screen.

In a series of three articles, Gina Marchetti advances the analysis of class in the action genre. Examining the television series *The A-Team* (1983-86, 1987), she notes a complex play of contradictions that offer various hooks for the mass audience while presenting an action adventure narrative (Marchetti 1987). In a subsequent article on the action adventure genre, she discusses how this genre deals with social inequality while presenting entertainment in action (Marchetti 1989). In her study of *Year of the Dragon* (1985), Marchetti (1991) discusses the contradictions within and among class, race/ethnicity, and gender in the film. Vietnam vet cop Stanley White is assigned to New York's Chinatown, where he tracks down the leader of a new Chinatown gang who has murdered White's wife early on in the film. In the process, White falls in love with a Chinese American broadcast news reporter. During the making and distribution of the film, which is based on a best-selling novel by Robert Daley, it was actively criticized as racist by Asian American activists. Marchetti shows how the contradictions among race, class, and gender are not functions simply of character but also of narration and spectacle. Whereas Eckert's approach emphasizes displacement of class (onto differences of rural/urban, for example), reminding us to look beyond the surface level of the narrative to textual operations, Marchetti emphasizes the film's ability to mask one aspect, such as racism, with another, such as sexism.

If Stanley has legitimized white, male power over nonwhite woman, he has also allowed for the fulfillment of the working-class fantasy of possessing wealth magically through romance and dominating it through sexuality. A desire for class equality, thus, obscures the text's otherwise too-obvious racism and sexism. Moreover, the film's concluding romantic embrace can be read symbolically as a liberal call for racial understanding and harmony. Stanley's romance with Tracy can also be seen as the way the character comes to grips with and overcomes his own racism by falling in love. In this case, the myth of romantic

love can be seen as not only the cure-all for crises of male identity but also an antidote for the text's rather open racism. According to this reading, the containment of Tracy's possible sexual threat through heterosexual romance can be seen as a function of her gender rather than her race or ethnicity, so the text can use sexism to mask its racism if this interpretation is pursued. (Marchetti 1991, 294)

These approaches to the issue of class and action heroes offer ways of understanding the action film's complicated pleasures. And realizing that the films are complex, however simple they seem in manifest content, is essential. As Marchetti notes, although *Year of the Dragon* was protested by Asian American media activists, the Asian American audience was far less critical and, in fact, often found gratification in the narrative. If we are to develop a sophisticated critique of the dominant forms of mass culture and to construct effective alternatives, we must strive for complexity in our own analysis. In other words, we have to account for the pleasures of the texts we study and the complexities of audience responses to them. Dismissing action films from a position of high-culture elitism or self-assured political correctness amounts to reproducing a biased class attitude rather than investigating a class phenomenon.

### In Action

Steven Seagal's action hero characters in his various films share similar traits: they rely on physical strength and skill, they are fearless in the face of danger, and they solve problems with action (but not without wit and cunning). But what particularly interests me in *Above the Law* is the fantasy configuration of masculinity and class positioned between two key social institutions—the family and the police—that are both threatened by drug criminals. Throughout this complicated narrative of masculine achievement, several things remain constant: references to illegal federal intelligence operations that echo public knowledge, the validation of the family and the male role as protector, the flaws and mistakes of large-scale bureaucracies (the police, FBI, CIA, U.S. government), the importance of standing up against corruption, the importance



of coworkers, and the necessity of direct physical action as it is represented in hand-to-hand combat and skilled use of firearms.

The story line sets up the key thematic terms. Although spectacle in the fight sequences serves the most important plot functions (and appears every ten to fifteen minutes of screen time) and is the most memorable part of the Seagal films, it is important to note that the plot's turns supply many hooks for masculinity and class as narrative. Although the action film eschews characters' inner psychology, the turns of events make it clear that a "real man" has to struggle. Such effort is narratively accented in *Above the Law*'s introduction, when we see old family photos as we hear Niccolo Toscani's voice describing his Sicilian immigrant background. The first action sequence depicts his apprenticeship in the study of martial arts in Japan. In an episode set in 1973 on the Vietnam-Cambodia border, we see young Toscani as a CIA agent involved in secret operations. He is present at the "chemical interrogation" of prisoners by a CIA physician, which consists of drug injection and torture, apparently in revenge for interference with the doctor's drug running. Toscani intervenes and, after a drawn-gun standoff, he leaves, yelling, "You think you're soldiers! You're fucking barbarians!" He says he's through. The scene dissolves to a Chicago Catholic church in 1988 and the baptism of Toscani's first child. At the subsequent party, we learn that he is now a police detective.

His first investigation involves finding a missing cousin, a teenage girl. At a bar seeking information, he punches out several guys, overpowers one who points a gun at him, and finally rescues the schoolgirl from a room upstairs, where she is in bed with her boyfriend and cocaine. Currying favor when roughed up, the boyfriend tells of an upcoming drug shipment, and in the next scene Toscani is seen illegally wiretapping to get more information. In the next action episode, Chicago police wait for the deal to go down but are interrupted by overzealous federal agents; the scene erupts in a chase, with Toscani hanging on to the roof of the criminals' car. Although apprehended, the criminal Salvano and his henchman are released by the FBI in response to a call from higher up, and the Chicago police are told to hold off investigating Salvano because he is cooperating on some secret matter of impor-

tance. Toscani storms out of the meeting with the FBI, disgusted that the biggest drug dealer in town is let go.

Repeating a frequent pattern in cop action films of personal involvement driving an investigation, Toscani continues his pursuit of Salvano on his own and trails the mobster to Toscani's church, which the criminal visits and then leaves. The parish priest spots the detective and reveals a secret basement room where a group of Latin American refugees are hidden, including Father Tomasino, recently arrived from El Salvador. The following Sunday, Toscani is attending Mass with his family when a bomb goes off, killing the senior priest.

One might think that Toscani acts alone because he is the key figure in all the fight sequences, but it is important to note that he is not a loner: the collectivity of the community is embodied in his actions. Here, the church is central to community identity and at the heart of the sovereign identity of the ordinary people. Toscani's widowed mother relates to the priest as a friend and confidant, the "father" takes a parental interest in Nico, and when the church is violated by the bomb, Toscani assumes the patriarchal burden of bringing the perpetrators to justice. In other films Seagal's character also fights for social justice, for the common people against the criminal/corporate/capitalist/government conspiracy. He represents a masculinity that is disgusted by violation and fights against it: on an immediate and local level and on a global, transnational one—in his most recent film, on a global environmental level. In the action cinema, masculinity is a fluid term and is not present only in the hero; it is also embodied negatively in the villain. The dramatic narration shows and finally resolves the conflict between these two kinds of masculinity. Seagal's characters embody a "proper" masculinity, one that is self-assured and that protects and serves the weak. The villains embody a masculinity out of control, a form of male hysteria that is usually quite clearly marked.

While seeking further information about the now missing Father Tomasino, the detective faces off a gang of toughs in an alley. Late that night, a phone call from an old CIA buddy warns Toscani that he and his family are in grave danger. The cop is then put on suspension and faces an assassination attempt by five guys on his way home. After disposing of them, he returns home to



move his wife and child out. Toscani then follows the trail to Father Tomasino's hiding place, only to meet up with the CIA hit squad, his old enemy Zargon the torturer M.D., and the drug dealer Salvano "chemically interrogating" the priest to find out if he has told anyone of their plan to kill a U.S. senator who is investigating intelligence agency involvement in drug trafficking.

A gunfight ensues, with Toscani escaping after seeing his police partner shot. Believing her dead, he goes to her apartment and finds the documents Father Tomasino was going to give to the senator. The entire scheme involves the CIA using Zargon's drug money to finance the Contra forces invading Sandinista Nicaragua. Now understanding the plan, Toscani spies on Zargon, who captures and tortures him with chemicals before the planned murder of the politician. Toscani overcomes the drug's effects, kills the criminals, and foils the assassination. The film ends with a shot of the Capitol building and Toscani's voice-over, as if giving testimony before Congress, warning that no element of the government should be "above the law."

Underpinning the entire story in *Above the Law* is a basic displacement of class oppression and class conflict as an issue. At a key point in most cop action stories, the police officer faces a decision to go against direct orders or prescribed rules of law and conduct. The narrative usually posits this as a moment of moral and ethical choice that forces the cop to disregard rules in order to become the agent of justice. Toscani first enacts this "moral choice" in the Vietnam sequence, where his orders are to "observe and assist" the interrogation. He also disregards the rules when he enters the bar looking for his cousin and roughs up some patrons. And again, he acts on his own when admonished to leave Salvano alone. When he is suspended, he must act on his own to protect his family and catch the villains.

But what this common narrative configuration represses is the reality of actual or threatened economic hardship in such a situation. Many ordinary working-class people gain workplace knowledge concerning their employers' illegal or unethical activities. They observe white-collar crimes ranging from false billing to tax evasion, from health and safety code violations to toxic waste dumping. But the workers also know that the cost of whistle-blowing is the loss of their jobs, or, if their reports are kept internal to

the organization, a reputation as a troublemaker. Usually, workers who speak up face immediate and tangible economic punishment that affects them and their families. The necessity of keeping their jobs keeps workers, both blue-collar and white-collar, in line. Two signifying absences allow for the central action fantasy in *Above the Law*: Toscani never loses his livelihood (his ability to support his family), and he sees corruption as an aberration that can be corrected, not as a structural condition of the existing order. He is enabled to do what is right, pursue the criminal, find the wrongdoer, stand up for the victims, without regard for his personal economic situation. His personal ethical motivation is granted full expression as a motivating device in the plot. He tells the CIA: "You think you're above the law. You're not above *my* law."

This core fantasy in which one does the right thing without having to calculate economic hardship has a great appeal in films that draw a working-class audience. And this reflects one of the key lessons of the Reagan-Bush era: by making homelessness widespread and visible, the state underlined the reality that most working-class and lower-middle-class people are just a few paychecks from being homeless, thus providing a not-very-subtle lesson about staying in line, not making waves, not acting on principle. In Seagal's films this fantasy finds considerable narrative support in the thematic importance of family and friendship. Toscani's male potency is most dramatically conveyed through his physical strength and martial arts skill, but it also finds expression in his official role as cop and his role in the family as protector. He begins the film-long quest when at the baptism party his grandmother implores him to find his cousin. Later, when his family is threatened, he calls on his Italian male relatives for help. (Earlier, at the party, his police buddies joke that Toscani has more relatives under federal indictment than any other cop in the city, underlining Toscani's position between the Sicilian family-organized Mafia and the police.) The Catholic church reinforces the theme of family, with the baptizing father protecting the refugees. The priest also has an emotional bond with Toscani, as stand-in for the cop's deceased father. When the cleric is killed by a bomb, Toscani carries the martyr's body from the church (Figure 11.1). His wife's pleas for him to stop being proud and to compromise only strengthen his resolve as a cop.





Figure 11.1. Toscani carries the priest's body out of the bombed church.

Although Toscani's partner, Dolores Jackson (Pam Grier, best known for her roles in "blaxploitation" films such as *Coffy*, 1973), reveals her bravery in the shootouts, she is in her last week of police duty before using her newly acquired law degree to work for the district attorney (a common narrative hook in the action genre: the sidekick's imminent retirement increases suspense that the character will be killed in action). Toscani continuously tries to have Jackson play a subordinate role, so she won't be tainted by his illegal ways. As she comes to his aid under fire, the plot emphasizes her loyalty and willingness to face danger, but it also underlines Toscani's patriarchal protector role. This is particularly marked visually when Toscani visits Jackson's place to fetch the political documents. Believing that she is dead, he stops to look at a photo of her with him and his wife and child. Given their relative positions in the photo, it looks like he has two wives (Figure 11.2). Further, the other photos he finds of Jackson show her alone, even as a child. It seems she has no family, except



Figure 11.2. A photo at his partner's apartment shows Toscani flanked by his wife (played by Sharon Stone, left), who holds their baby, and Dolores Jackson (played by Pam Grier).

Toscani's—nor, for that matter, does his wife, who has to be deposited with his Mafia relatives for her own safety.

Although women are subordinate, in terms of race, pure thugery is an equal opportunity employer. Although Salvano's gang appears to be mostly Latino, Toscani also has to face off a white tough who sees the cop subduing his Latino friend. When another gang of hoodlums comes after him with automatic weapons, Toscani shoots the white guy in the group and tosses the Asian member through a window while subduing the Latinos. Salvano's bully boys even include a red-haired suit-wearing fellow. Whereas the FBI team is black and white, the CIA bad boys are all white, as is Zargon (Henry Silva).<sup>6</sup> The most demeaning racial stereotype in the film appears with a turbaned South Asian who is comically hysterical when the street fighting moves into his grocery store. This "integration" is a trend that Hollywood seems to have turned into a norm in the mid-1970s after extensive criticism about racial



casting of villains, and here it both changes and reinforces social prejudices. Although the bad guys and good guys achieve remarkable racial equity (though obviously gender imbalanced), the main struggle is between white men.

### Class in Analysis

Given the preceding presentation of *Above the Law*, I can elaborate some of the problems in trying to do a class analysis of film. It is worth mentioning briefly how the discussion of gender and race has developed in film and cultural studies because it suggests how class analysis may fare. In the past twenty years, first with feminist analysis and later with gay/lesbian/queer criticism and more recently with race investigation, media studies have come to terms with gender and race in matters of representation and reception. But class, although often evoked as a term, has yet to be elaborated adequately as a critical concept. Is this just an inconsequential temporal lag that is about to be remedied, or does class as a social phenomenon present challenges to conceptualization? In either case, it must be noted that the strong development of gender and race studies coincided with the growth of identity constituencies within cultural analysis, particularly in higher education. No similar social group pushes for class analysis. Rather, to the extent that it is a concern, it remains an issue for Marxists.

Lenin ([1913] 1971) has pointed out that Marxism has three sources and three component parts. From economics, particularly English political economy, Marx developed his understanding of the production of surplus value as the engine of capitalism. From this perspective, the working class powered the motor. From the history of socialism, particularly French socialists, Marx drew an image of society deeply divided by class and a view of the working class, at that moment a new emerging social group opposed to feudalism while demonstrating a Jacobin resistance to the bourgeoisie, as politically essential to social change. And from the materialist tradition in philosophy, particularly as inflected by German philosophy, with Hegel's emphasis on history and dialectics, Marx found a historical role for the working class as the inevitable agent for changing capitalism into socialism. Thus Marx described the class structure of capitalism in its early stages when accumulation

and entrepreneurship supplied key defining characteristics. The result, within the history of Marxism as a political and intellectual movement, has been to place ultimate faith in the industrial working class as the necessary agent of revolutionary change. This faith has been challenged repeatedly in the twentieth century: narrow nationalism overwhelmed proletarian internationalism; actual communist revolutions took place in nations with very small working classes; many workers accepted fascism; industrial production in many fields evolved into automation and robotization requiring far fewer workers; unions drastically declined in the United States in terms of a share of the workforce; progressive social and political movements often found workers on the other side of their issues; and existing communisms imploded.

Marx and Engels never developed a systematic theory of class. The *Manifesto* ([1848] 1973) asserts that in the bourgeois era, "society as a whole is more and more splitting into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—bourgeois and proletariat" (68). Here is the classic statement that seems to predict increasing class polarization. But in his later work, particularly in the *Theories of Surplus Value*, Marx recognized the tendency of the middle classes to blur class boundaries and actually to increase in numbers.

The analytic power of Marxism's three components in accounting for the epochal change from feudalism to capitalism cannot be denied. But a great deal of left-wing thinking (and political organizing) has run aground by confusing the abstract and analytic concept of the working class with actual workers or groups of workers and by using the abstractions for prediction. Without specific study and historical context, Marxist concepts of class are simply dogma. Although I cannot develop a fuller discussion of this topic here, I can refer to some useful starting points for thinking about the U.S. situation. Stephen J. Rose's *Social Stratification in the United States* (1992) provides a clear introduction to the basics of contemporary wealth and income distribution across occupational and gender and race categories. In *Prisoners of the American Dream*, Mike Davis (1986) explains the particular nature of the U.S. working class in political terms. Stanley Aronowitz's *False Promises* (1973) offers an interpretation of U.S. labor, with attention to its cultural dimension. And *Classes*, by Erik Olin Wright



(1985), provides a Marxist analysis rooted in the sociology of the United States.

In media studies, gender and race investigation has tended to move through three overlapping (but by no means mutually exclusive) phases. The first phase consists of finding makers and explicating their works, past and present. This has finite limits for feminist, gay, or racial/ethnic minority inquiries, although it can be extended from directors and screenwriters to stars. However, whatever their class origins, by the time individuals in the commercial industry get to the point of having creative control, they belong to the upper strata, economically and culturally. Only in rare cases are people catapulted from the working class to positions of entertainment industry power. Arguable examples might include Elvis Presley and Roseanne, who flaunts a "white trash with money" image. But power and control in commercial culture reside ultimately in finance and distribution, which are corporate and capitalist. We would have to look in the marginal areas of home movies/videos, student productions, cable-access programming, labor activist documentary, and low-power broadcasting to find working-class media makers.

The second phase of media analysis is impelled by a motivation to examine a group's representations. Although the working class is directly represented in almost all Hollywood films, it is seldom at the heart of dramatic construction. Even films about union struggles, such as *Matewan* (1987), often concentrate on the organizer rather than the rank and file. So we do have workers represented—female and male, white, black, Asian, and Latino—often through a texture of service, sales, secretarial, and other minor characters, but also in displaced forms in which their class situation is usually forgotten: the waitress, the enlisted soldier, the prostitute, the cowboy, the taxi driver, and so on. Or someone who is technically a small owner may be presented as a worker, such as the truck driver-operator hero of *White Line Fever* (1975) (Tress 1975). When working-class people are at the center of the drama, they are often depicted as rising quickly out of their class. In the comedy *Working Girl* (1988), for example, the Melanie Griffith character is brought from the secretarial pool into the upper-class world of executive management; In *Pretty Woman*

(1990), the Cinderella quickly leaves street prostitution for luxury hotels and shops.

Historical study provides an important analytic approach to group representations. Social historian George Lipsitz (1976, 1982, 1990) has considered the presentation of the working class in 1940s film and ethnic working-class sitcoms in 1950s television. In his dissertation on representations of the working class in Hollywood films of the 1970s, Peter Steven (1982) considers a significant group of films plus three works in depth: *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Norma Rae* (1979), and *Blue Collar* (1978). Writing in the early 1980s, Steven noted that a shift had occurred and that Hollywood had a new openness to dealing with workers' lives. Although there is always some room for this in the commercial mainstream, in retrospect it seems that the 1970s produced a cycle that arose, flourished, and trailed off rather than marked a decisive change in subject matter. In an essay on media representations of the working class, Stanley Aronowitz (1989) asserts that there has been a definite pattern of decline, quantitatively and qualitatively, from *The Honeymooners* (1950–52, 1952–57, 1966–70, under various Jackie Gleason shows) to the present. This argument matches Aronowitz's (1973, 1981) other analyses of class in the United States, in which he sees a vast change in the workforce that makes traditional left notions of an industrial proletariat obsolete. When he claims there are no more working-class depictions in the popular media, he also tends to extrapolate from short-term changes. Clearly, the sitcom families of *Roseanne* (1988–) *Married . . . with Children* (1987–), *Roc* (1991–94), and *The Simpsons* (1989–) are working-class by husband's occupation and social context. And we often find working-class families in TV movies of the week and made-for-cable "trauma dramas," such as *The Burning Bed* (1984), and working-class women characters at the center of films such as *Silkwood* (1983) and *Mask* (1985), as critic Elayne Rapping (1987, 1992, 1994) points out in several acute analyses of gender and class representations in media. Cable television, with its intense demand for product, has opened up some opportunities, as with *Laurel Avenue* (1994), depicting several generations of an African American midwestern urban working-class family.



Once we move past sitcoms and domestic melodramas into the public sphere, the stories are dominated by (white heterosexual) men, and those men are seldom clearly identified as working-class, except possibly in origin, as in the bio film of the athlete or entertainer. Thus, any further analysis of class in commercial dramatic narrative has to address the question of how class is represented, including, as I mentioned earlier, how it may be displaced. In turn, the critic needs to understand how such displacement is read by the audience. Although many Marxists would argue that the police are not part of the working class, except by origin, in *Above the Law* and Seagal's subsequent *Out for Justice*, the working-class milieu is essential to the hero's progress through the narrative.<sup>7</sup>

The third large area of critical investigation for gender and race analysis has been the audience, or spectatorship. Drawing on the insight that the text is only a pretext and that meaning is constructed through an audience's active involvement, critics have constructed various models of female spectatorship. To the extent that analysts call on their own frames of reference and experience in constructing their analyses, such studies have faced critical correction when it has been pointed out that their models presume heterosexual or white viewers. Robust studies of African American, Latino, and Asian American audiences remain on the agenda. At present, reception studies face two important adjustments. First, investigators must come to terms with diversity within groups—not all people who share one measure of identity are alike in other ways. Second, analysts need to clarify the procedures of ethnographic investigation, which often seem whimsical to skeptics.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond such corrections, which would apply to empirical or speculative studies of working-class audiences/spectatorship, it has to be acknowledged that such studies of cinema do not exist. Bruce Austin's (1989) comprehensive study of social science research on film audiences reveals that class has never been a significant term in such work. And only in some relatively recent work on television, notably David Morley's (1980, 1986) studies and Ellen Seiter's (1989, 1993) research, has class been addressed as an essential category.

How, then, would we look at the action hero, in this case Nico Toscani? Assuming that I am correct in supposing that such figures appeal more to the working class than to the upper levels of the middle class, we would have to elaborate a class-based analysis of

identification. But the concept of identification in dramatic narrative remains weakly developed. In the past three decades only two major advances have been made. The first is the concept of cinematic "double identification" elaborated in French film theories by Christian Metz and others. According to this concept, an audience member experiences a primary identification, essentially an activity of the psychoanalytically understood unconscious, that allows the process of film viewing to take place. Primary identification is linked to early childhood development of fantasy and desire. There is also a secondary identification, in which the viewer identifies with the central character and with the camera as a controlling presenter of narrative. This aspect of identification relates more to socially constructed identity. For our purposes here, it is easy to accept this distinction, with the observation that most of the time the action hero genre keeps the narration within the general scene of the protagonist. But clearly action films also trade heavily in fears (such as Zargon's sadism) and desires (the hero's skilled and muscular body) that relate to primary identification.

The second advance in thinking about identification concerns seeing it as gendered, and particularly as masculine and heterosexual in most cases. Arguments about minority spectatorship extend this insight and confirm that identification seems to function in conjunction with actual and perceived social power. But there has been no adequate accounting of how identification takes place across boundaries. Clearly it does take place—to get pleasure from the dominant media, women can follow masculine adventures; racial minorities accept white characters in a white privileged world; homosexuals and bisexuals project themselves into heterosexual characters and narratives; and working-class spectators follow middle-class or capitalist-class heroes. And the reverse is also the case: middle-class spectators can find working-class heroes appealing, especially when this is covered with a certain romanticization of the more "natural," more "masculine" character. The proletarian can function as the narrative Other for middle-class audiences, reproducing the power dialectic of subordination and desire, debasement and idealization so well worked out in media studies of race and gender.<sup>9</sup> In art experience, desire can override identity, and desire often acts subversively.

Genre analysis enhances our understanding of identification,



because any specific film and its responses need to be checked against others of their kind. Genre study provides access to the larger cultural context, including historical tradition. Although adventure stories with hero warriors are found in many cultures at many different times in history, the cop action film genre seems especially strong in U.S. cinema in the past thirty years. Today the cop narrative dominates much of prime time television the way the western story did earlier.<sup>10</sup> And with docutainment reality TV, such as *Cops* (1989–) and related shows, the police appear again as privileged narrative figures. Why should this be so characteristic of our cultural moment? Part of the answer rests in the position of the cop as someone who must function within a rule-bound bureaucracy and yet who is authorized to be violent in order to be the agent of justice. In terms of appeal to working-class audiences, part of the answer is that the cop is a worker, and may be female (*Blue Steel*, 1990), African American (*Passenger 57*, 1992), or, perhaps in the near future, homosexual. Is the cop then working-class? Sometimes. It is difficult to think of Crockett and Tubbs from *Miami Vice* (1984–89) as working-class, given their frequent impersonation of high rollers. But in the case of Seagal, especially in *Above the Law* and *Out for Justice*, the working-class context is unmistakable. At the narrative micro level of dialogue, voice, mise-en-scène, shot, editing, and dramatic situation, as well as in the depicted environment and the central character's family, the narrative is inscribed with class-conscious markers. Audience understanding draws on lived experience and class context on the one hand and the aesthetic object on the other to produce a kind of "cognitive mapping" of class in cinematic experience. What are the pleasures of these masculine fantasies? A full answer would have to synthesize from and further develop textual analysis and extratextual analysis, spectatorship and audience ethnography, aesthetics and sociology. The study of popular film has advanced through various stages in the past forty years. Genre and authorship studies have established the foundations for the consideration of commercial entertainment film. Gender, race, and ideological analyses have furthered knowledge. From this perspective, class analysis of popular dramatic narrative films is not only desirable but necessary for a full understanding.

## Notes

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1. For example, the drastic reductionism of Michael Parenti's *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (1992) understands almost all films and TV programs in terms of a content analysis of the narrative that amounts to propaganda for the capitalist class. No ambiguity or complexity is granted in the works under consideration. In Parenti's view, working-class viewers are helpless victims of the mass media, unable to select, filter, or change meanings.

2. In *Out for Justice* Seagal's character is separated from his wife and reconciles with her at the end. *Hard to Kill* begins with his character in a happy marriage and then develops a romance with the nurse who helps him heal, but otherwise the plots avoid the double structure of a dramatic line of action coupled with a heterosexual romance typical of the classic Hollywood cinema. In most films he is crucially assisted by a woman (variously African American, Native American, or white) or a man of color.

3. I should note, however, that when I started writing this essay, Michelle Citron and Rick Maxwell, two faculty colleagues who strongly relate to class issues in cultural analysis, in part from their own working-class backgrounds, took a special interest in it.

4. Susan Jeffords provides an extensive survey in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994).

5. There has been extensive recent critical study of gender as an issue in domestic melodrama, but less attention has been paid to race and class. I discuss a film portraying the effects of working-class unemployment in "Realist Melodrama and the African-American Family: Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts*" (1994).

6. In Silva's career as a heavy, his variation from the physiognomic norms of white European representation allowed him to play diverse as well as unspecified ethnicities.

7. Parenti, for example, in *Make-Believe Media* (1992), says police are not working-class. Inconsistently, in an earlier polemic, he seems to claim that everyone who is not an owner is a worker (Parenti 1989).

8. John Fiske's work is often cited for overgeneralization based on small samples studied for short terms. In *Power Plays Power Works* (1993), Fiske discusses a few homeless men in a shelter watching *Die Hard*. He notes an interesting behavior in which the men get the most pleasure from the film during action scenes of the villains attacking the corporation and its representatives, and then during scenes showing the lone hero fighting against the villains. They don't



watch the ending. Fiske relates this selective reading to his general thesis of underdog subversive reception and re-creation of culture.

9. I discuss some aspects of this in an analysis of *Shampoo* (Kleinhans 1981).

10. The cop genre continues, transforms, and displaces the western genre in an interesting evolution of U.S. masculine fantasy. For recent suggestive analyses of the western, see Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* (1992) and Tompkins's *West of Everything* (1992).

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